

Crisis and Perspectives in Secular Judaism

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How is it possible that secular Judaism—which in the twentieth century was Judaism's greatest force, developing Yiddish culture and allowing the emergence of Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel—has entered the twenty-first century on the defensive? To answer this question we must first remember that, as a social movement, there has never been just one secular Judaism but rather a number of social and intellectual movements within secular Judaism. And today these movements are in crisis.

What unifies democratic secular individuals (modernity has known non-democratic forms of secularism, like fascism and communism) is a worldview that dissociates religious from political power, based on values that respect freedom of individual conscience, tolerance, and the diversity of beliefs. Being secular defines the foundations underpinning one's sociability in a modern democratic society, but it does not point individuals or groups towards any specific social action goal. Only under certain historical circumstances—especially involving the defense of the very existence of a given secular society—does the struggle for secularization become a social movement. This has occurred in countries where the church is or was powerful (e.g., in a number of European nations or Mexico); it is also the case in Israel today, where religion and religious groups have colonized part of the state.

In modern Judaism, secularization has impacted both believers and non-believers, and in both cases groups sought alternatives to Orthodox Judaism. Jews of a liberal persuasion who believe in God have generally chosen to reformulate traditional religious practices and discourse in accord with the values of modernity: freedom of conscience, pluralism, tolerance, and democracy. Secular groups that espoused atheism (a militant atheist component was strong among those associated with the socialist

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tradition) or that are agnostic found their main channels of expression in Bundism, communism, and in most of Zionism's persuasions (from the liberal Herzl to the chauvinistic nationalism of Zeev Jabotinsky and the Marxist-Leninism of Meir Yaari). Although one might argue, from a sociological perspective, that these movements constituted **secular religions**, we can take a more conventional approach and differentiate between **non-theist** secular Judaism and movements and **theist** secularized religions, like conservative and reformist.

Ruth Calderon shares this view: “Unlike what is commonly accepted, it is not the relationship with God that separates secular and religious Jews. I tend to define the secular Israeli as a non-halakhic Jew, a definition embodying a wide range of secularity. It includes complete atheists, those with a more traditional approach, and those who experience a Divine presence in their lives but do not accept rabbinical authority or belong to a formal congregation or observe the commandments. Religious people are also far from constituting a monolithic community. Various liberal trends make it possible to interpret customs and ceremonies in new ways.”¹

Secular Judaism has never constituted—at least so far—**one** unitary social movement, nor does it offer one clear collective identity at present; that is, it is not a social movement capable of sparking the feeling that one belongs to a relatively closed community, delimited by common belief systems and/or ideologies and linked to institutions responsible for preserving unity, homogeneity, and the reproduction of this whole. In other words, to constitute **one** single social movement, secular Jews need a common cement—a cause, an ideology, values, like the State of Israel at the moment of its creation or the defense of Yiddish culture—something that will bring Jews together despite their individual differences. But right now, what we have are secular Jews, that is, isolated individuals, each defining and choosing those aspects of Jewish culture that are relevant to him or her, grounded on constant doubts, a varied gamut of experiences, and ongoing instability—for what ensures stability are collective consensuses that limit cognitive dissonance and homogenize discourses.

¹ “We enter the Talmud barefoot,” <http://www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/articles/26>

Contemporary secular Jews are tied to a profoundly unstable Judaism, for there are no institutions to endow them with unity by providing them with a common denominator. This means that although most Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora are secular, they are especially fragile when it comes to the institutionalization of their Judaism. Secular Jews make up the majority of the Jewish people but are a minority in community organizations. The vast majority of Jewish intellectuals have absolutely no active part in Jewish institutions, which many of them seem to be conservative if not reactionary.

A secular Jew's feeling of Jewishness most generally finds expression in the desire to keep his or her parents' or grandparents' memory alive and in a feeling of solidarity with other Jews who may be persecuted or in danger, but it has no clear symbolic or ideological expression. So it would be quite accurate to state that most Jewish people are confused Jews—that is, they are people who feel themselves to be non-believers but who are unable to clearly explain what this sentiment means. Why? Because, as commented above, the ideologies that in the twentieth century allowed secular Jews access to this feeling are now in crisis.

Non-religious, secular Judaism was built upon two pillars: socialism and Zionism, both of which fostered a revised understanding of Jewish history. There is no need to comment on the crisis of socialism. As far as Zionism, it is now a dream come true, and Israel no longer holds the same attraction as prior to creation of the State and during its earliest decades of existence (my generation took nourishment from the mystic strength of the notion of chalutz, incomprehensible to young people today).

Secular Judaism is intimately linked to a historical vision of the Jewish people and to the reconstitution of messianism. As a field of knowledge, Jewish history is itself a product of secular Judaism. Both pillars are in crisis today. We are living through a period of disbelief in the notion of progress, a period of fear and uncertainty about the winds of history. Today's new generations find no special meaning either in the history of mankind or in Jewish history in particular. In the place of History with a capital 'H', everyone is taking refuge in personal subjectivity and endeavoring to build his or her own individual story. Secular messianism went into crisis when the great political ideologies collapsed.

What is missing? What can bind together and stabilize a Jewish secular identity? The answer is simple: a common cause or goals and/or professional or voluntary institutional structures that are responsible for its collective organization and reproduction.

When and how will secular Judaism once again produce social movements that can revitalize Judaism? If we can be certain about anything, it is that the future is unpredictable and never a repetition of the past. The process of rebuilding secular Judaism will not be the work of individual intellectuals. The latter can contribute by developing analyses of past courses that will help in devising new outlooks for the future. In the best case, Jewish intellectuals can identify trends inside Judaism that may be helpful to individuals and groups of secular Jews during this period of historical transition. Our main contribution is to undo the dogmas and untie the intellectual strait-jackets that sustained secular Judaism in the nineteenth century, but that today stand as barriers to its development.

Among the issues we need to discuss, I would point out the following:

- 1) The new secular Judaism will be fruit of a critical dialogue with religious secular Judaism and, more generally, with the age-old Jewish religious culture. It is no accident that the main movement within secular Judaism derived from someone trained in the liberal religious tradition, to wit, Rabbi Sherwin Wine.
- 2) Neither atheism nor agnosticism fills the emotional need of lending meaning to life. They both inspired generations that believed in the power of science, of reason, and of progress during a historical period when religion wielded political power and was confronting the values of modernity. Atheism and agnosticism are still with us but they usually do not move anyone to collective action, nor do they respond to the need for meaning or collective mobilization.
- 3) Antisemitism and solidarity with the persecution of Jews will remain one of the cements of Jewish identity. But antisemitism cannot forever be presented as an

inevitable fate, nor be associated either implicitly or explicitly with a discourse or sentiments that viscerally separate the Jew from the non-Jew.

- 4) The State of Israel should be one of the pillars of secular Judaism, both because the Israelites have the potential creativity to build a secular Jewish culture and because Jews in the Diaspora identify with the State of Israel. Unfortunately, the Arab-Israeli conflict has distorted this process of identification and has delayed the process of building a secular Judaism in the State of Israel.
- 5) The importance of the State of Israel should not obscure the fact that secular Jews in the Diaspora and in Israel face different problems. In Israel, secular Jews are united by a common concern and a common goal: the struggle against the theocratization of the State of Israel. In the Diaspora, there is no such drive. At the same time, inside the State of Israel, issues involving Jewish tradition are in one way or another present in the country's educational system and in its day-to-day life.
- 6) Even more complex is the question of defining who is Jewish. In Israel, the Law of Return defines the right to citizenship, bringing into play economic and political interests that do not exist in the Diaspora, where an open perspective in relation to mixed marriages and even a proselytist attitude towards sympathizers of Judaism should be encouraged.
- 7) The many national cultures of the Diaspora vary greatly from each other, and this affects the contents of their secular Judaism. Secular Judaism needs to place greater value on different national expressions of Judaism and, in general, on the Diaspora as a positive component of Jewish identity.
- 8) Lastly, we know that Judaism is a generational creation. Even more so in modern times. The first generations of secular Jews came into being as a reaction to their parents, whose reference point was an Orthodox Judaism of rigid values that did not respond to the challenges and expectations of the modern world. A large part of today's young secular Jews have no clear reference point from which, or against which, to define their goals. Although the new secular Judaism will fundamentally be a response by the latest generations—making proposals befitting the new historical context—the

generation now leaving the stage has a responsibility to support and facilitate this transition. For even if we have no clear proposal to offer nor a model against which one should react, we can still pass on a cultural heritage, recognizing that the testament will be written by those ready and willing to take up the legacy of secular Jewish tradition.